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# Couples' Attitudes, Childbirth, and the Division of Labor

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In this article, the authors examine effects of partners' attitudes on the timing of the birth of a first child, the division of domestic labor, the division of child care, and the division of paid labor of couples. They use data from the Panel Study of Social Integration in the Netherlands, which includes independent measures of both partners' attitudes in one wave (1995) and family life behavior in the next wave (1999). Using theories about decision rules, the authors formulate hypotheses about possible outcomes when partners have dissimilar attitudes. The results show that partners' attitudes are not always identical. Most important, attitudes of both partners are found to be equally important in joint decisions.

***Keywords:*** *attitudes; partners; childbirth; division of labor*

Attitudes and values concerning family life show a long-term trend toward greater gender equality, more individual autonomy, and increasing acceptance of labor force participation of wives and mothers, both in the United States and in Europe (Lesthaeghe, 1995; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001). This trend has coincided with similar changes in family life itself.

These macro trends have sparked discussion about the causal mechanisms linking these two processes. Are changes in values and attitudes

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resulting in behavioral changes? Is behavioral change resulting in changes in values and attitudes? Are both processes operating simultaneously, or is a third factor—for instance, economic development—influencing both processes (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2002)?

Microlevel studies that examine the impact of attitudes and values on family life behaviors and vice versa have made an important contribution to answering these questions. These studies show that both processes—termed *value selection* and *value adaptation*, respectively—are operative at the same time (e.g., Axinn & Thornton, 1993, 1996; Moors, 2002; Thornton, Alwin, & Camburn, 1983). Particularly well-documented is the impact of attitudes and values on the family life course and the organization of daily life. For instance, women with more traditional gender role attitudes are more likely to enter into a marriage and are more likely to do so at an early age than women with egalitarian gender role attitudes (Barber & Axinn, 1998; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Moors, 1997; Smith-Lovin & Tickamyer, 1978; Thornton et al., 1983). Negative effects of egalitarian gender role attitudes on the timing of childbirth and the number of children have also been reported (Thornton et al., 1983). Furthermore, egalitarian gender role attitudes of women and men have been shown to lead to an increasing contribution of men to household and caring tasks (Jansen & Kalmijn, 2002). In addition, other types of attitudes, such as attitudes toward having children, have also been reported to influence family behaviors. For instance, positive parenthood attitudes lead to having children at an earlier age (Beets, Liefbroer, & De Jong Gierveld, 1999).

An important limitation of nearly all studies on the impact of attitudes and values on family life behavior is the fact that they only pay attention to the influence of attitudes of one of the partners—generally the wife. However, most family life decisions have consequences for both partners and, therefore, it seems natural that attitudes of both partners play a role in these decisions. After all, choices concerning the timing of childbirth and the division of household chores, child care, and paid labor are usually taken jointly by a couple.

The focus of most studies on the values and attitudes of just one partner would be justified if partners hold similar values and attitudes. Indeed, theories on mate selection and homogamy suggest that partners often hold similar attitudes because they partly select one another on corresponding values (Kalmijn, 1991, 1998; Krishnan, 1993; Thomson, 1990). In addition, partners' attitudes and values may grow more alike with time as a result of shared experience (Aube & Koestner, 1995). However, it seems highly unlikely that partners will always completely agree in their values and attitudes (Social and Cultural Planning Office, 2000). Therefore, if disagreements on these issues occur, the question arises how partners will handle these differences in attitudes and

values and whether such differences lead to compromises or to a dominance of attitudes of one of the partners. Hence, this study focuses on the influence of attitudes of both partners on family life decisions. In particular, we will examine the impact of gender role attitudes and attitudes toward having children on decisions with regard to the division of household and child care tasks, labor force participation of women, and the timing of parenthood.

## Research Background

The number of studies that have addressed the impact of values, attitudes, and other subjective evaluations of both partners on joint decision making is limited. Among studies that do focus on differences in effects of husbands' and wives' attitudes, most concentrate on their effects on marital quality or marital conflict. The study of Amato and Booth (1995) shows opposite effects of egalitarian gender role attitudes on reported marital quality for husbands and wives. When wives' gender role attitudes become less traditional, their perceived marital quality declines; but when husbands become more modern, their perceived marital quality increases. However, the husbands and wives in the study by Amato and Booth are not married to one another, so they were not able to examine effects of attitudes of spouses simultaneously. McHale and Crouter (1992) show that within couples, spouses who experience incongruence between their gender role attitudes and family work evaluate their marriage more negatively than spouses who experience less incongruence. Kluwer, Heesink, and Van de Vliert (1997) show that for the Netherlands, the spouses' gender role attitudes influence their conflict interaction patterns about the division of labor. Traditional wives and wives with traditional husbands tend to avoid conflicts during negotiations about the division of labor.

The direct relationship between couples' gender role attitudes and behavioral decisions has been examined by Greenstein (1996), using cross-sectional data from the *National Survey of Family and Households*. Husbands' contribution to domestic labor decreases as gender role attitudes of husbands become more traditional. However, this effect is found for men married to egalitarian women only. For men married to traditional women, no effect of husbands' attitudes is found. Thomson (2002) addresses the impact of family attitudes on actual decision making in another field. She examines whether gender role traditionalism, sexual conservatism, and conjugal and extended familism influence the timing of childbirth. She reports that the impact of the values of both partners are additive. The type of attitudes that influence the timing of a first child differs between women and men, however. The timing

is influenced by the level of conjugal familism and extended familism of the wife but by the level of extended familism of the husband.

Some studies do not focus on attitudes but address the impact of other types of subjective evaluations on joint decisions. Many of these studies are about the role of child intentions and desires of couples on parenthood decisions (Coombs & Chang, 1981; Morgan, 1985; Thomson, 1997; Thomson & Hoem, 1998; Thomson, McDonald, & Bumpass, 1990). Results of these studies show that a lack of agreement between partners in their desire for children or in their intentions to have children exerts a strong effect on the timing of childbirth. Couples who completely disagree about having children actually have children at a later age than couples in which both partners share a strong desire for children. However, couples who disagree still have children at an earlier age than couples with no intention or desire for children. Furthermore, these studies show that in case of disagreement between partners, both husbands and wives exert equal influence on the outcome. No evidence is found for a dominance of the desires or intentions of one of the partners.

## Theory

To understand what will happen to family decisions if partners hold diverging attitudes, it is useful to focus on the kind of heuristics or decision rules that partners use in resolving conflicts (Corijn, Liefbroer, & De Jong Gierveld, 1996; Scanzoni & Szinovacs, 1980; Thomson, 1990). The heuristic used will have consequences for the importance attached to the attitudes of each of the partners. Based on existing literature, at least four decision heuristics can be distinguished.

A first heuristic that partners may use in dealing with diverging attitudes is based on the literature on power relationships within unions and suggests that the attitudes of the most powerful partner will be decisive in decision-making processes (McDonald, 1980). Generally, relative power within a relationship is determined by the socioeconomic resources (education, occupational status, income) available to spouses. If a spouse has easy access to these resources, he or she is less dependent on the relationship, because he or she can cope outside the relationship. Therefore, according to the power rule, the more access a partner has to scarce resources, the more power this spouse holds and the more likely it is that this spouse's attitudes will prevail in decision making. A concrete example is given by Sorenson (1989). She showed that for Hispanics, the influence of the wife on the final family size increases when she gets more educated and therefore has better chances on the labor market. A special

version of this rule is the patriarchal rule. This rule states that husbands win all or most of the time at disagreements. We consider this to be a variant of the power rule, because this heuristic is based on the assumption that husbands are usually the ones with the most resources within a relationship.

A second heuristic is based on the assumption that spouses view each other as equals and that this notion of equality permeates all domains of family life. The corresponding decision rule is that partners view each other's attitudes as equally important and try to strike a compromise if they hold diverging opinions. The result of such a strategy will be that the decision will be midway between the preferences of both partners. For instance, if one partner prefers an egalitarian division of labor and the other partner a traditional, gender-specific division of labor, the actual division of labor will end up somewhere in between. Probably the wife will still do most of the homework and the husband will do most of the paid labor, but the other partner will also contribute, though to a lesser extent, to the labor within both these domains. Studies on intentions of couples toward childbearing assert that if they differ in their child-number or child-timing intentions, couples often try to strike a compromise (Thomson, 1997; Thomson & Hoem, 1998; Thomson et al., 1990). We call this the "golden mean" hypothesis.

A third heuristic that spouses could use is based on traditional ideas about a gender-specific division of household and paid labor. The New Home Economics Theory (Becker, 1981) provides a theoretical rationale for a gender-specific division of labor in which the wife focuses on family and children and the husband focuses on paid employment. Thomson (1990) bases her sphere of interest rule on this traditional model of family life. According to this heuristic, wives' attitudes will dominate in decision making within her sphere of interest, whereas husbands' attitudes will dominate if decisions have to be taken in his sphere of interest. According to Thomson (1990), this heuristic offers researchers a rationale not to include information on husbands' goals and attitudes in studies on fertility and child rearing. This sphere of interest rule can also be considered as a special instance of the power rule. According to Scanzoni and Szinovacs (1980), power is a situational good. As a result of specialization, wives usually have a larger say in household issues and husbands in labor market issues, leading to a situation in which both partners wield power in their own sphere of interest.

All the heuristics discussed so far imply that partners, in one way or another, arrive at a joint decision. However, there is yet another possibility that can occur when couples have dissimilar values. The interaction between partners with conflicting values could lead to the postponement of decisions. This decision rule is called the "social drift rule" (Neal & Groat,

1980; Thomson, 1990). Because of conflicting thoughts on decisions, the confrontation on joint decisions could systematically be avoided and decision making could be postponed. Disagreement will be resolved by doing nothing, leading to the continuation of the existing status quo.

## Hypotheses

Decisions on family-related issues such as the division of household labor or having children are usually not based on static agreements between spouses but part of a dynamic process of negotiation taking place during an extended period of time (Greenstein, 1996; Kluwer et al., 1997; Pittman, Solheim, & Blanchard, 1996). Although most partners eventually reach a more or less satisfying agreement, this will only come at the cost of much conflict and negotiation among couples who hold contradictory attitudes (Kluwer et al., 1997). Which partner's attitudes will prevail? The decision rules outlined in the previous section imply different answers to this question. The power rule suggests that the attitudes of the most powerful partner will prevail. Although the educational level of women has risen in recent years, husbands generally still have a higher occupational level and higher income than wives do (Blossfeld & Drobnič, 2001; Gornick & Jacobs, 1998). This implies that the average bargaining position of husbands is stronger than that of wives. Therefore, we hypothesize that if the power rule applies, the attitudes of husbands will have a stronger effect on the decisions made within a couple than the attitudes of wives. This is expected to hold true with regard to all types of decisions to be made, be it the division of household labor and child care, the division of paid employment, or the timing of childbirth.

The golden mean heuristic implies that partners will attach equal importance to the opinions of each of them. Therefore, based on this decision rule, it can be hypothesized that the effect of the attitudes of wives and husbands on family decisions will be equal. By using the golden mean rule, spouses practice a process of negotiation that gives them the opportunity to work out their differences. Defending one's own interest through bargaining can facilitate the reconciliation of spouses' interests, which will lead to a synthesis of both positions (Kluwer et al., 1997). As in the case of the power rule, this is expected to hold true with regard to all types of family decisions to be made.

The two previous rules expect that attitudes have the same effect, irrespective of the family decision under consideration. This is clearly different with regard to the sphere of interest rule. This rule implies that the attitudes of the partner in whose sphere of interest a decision is located will be dominant.

Given that household and child-rearing decisions are thought to belong to the sphere of interest of the wife and labor force decisions to the sphere of interest of the husband (Thomson, 1990), we hypothesize that attitudes of wives will have a stronger effect on decisions about the division of household labor and child-rearing tasks and about having children, whereas the attitudes of husbands will have a stronger effect on decisions about paid employment.

The final heuristic discussed above is the social drift rule. This rule implies that if partners disagree, they postpone decisions and the status quo is continued. We hypothesize that if the social drift rule applies, couples with diverging attitudes will postpone (additional) childbearing. Continuation of the status quo with regard to the division of labor will, for most couples, imply the continuation of or retreat to relatively traditional, gendered, behavioral patterns. Therefore, we expect that if the social drift rule applies, couples will adhere to a division of labor that reflects traditional gender roles.

In Table 1, a summary of the different decision rules and their hypothesized consequences is presented.

## Data and Method

### Data

The data come from the Panel Study on Social Integration in the Netherlands. In 1987, 1,775 young adults born in 1961, 1965, and 1969 were interviewed (using face-to-face and self-administered questionnaires). The second wave of data collection was conducted in 1989 (mail questionnaire). A third wave of interviews was held in 1991, and the fourth wave was conducted in 1995 (both face-to-face and self-administered questionnaires). The last wave of data collection took place in 1999 (telephone and self-administered questionnaires). The respondents were approximately 18, 22, and 26 at the time of the first survey wave in 1987, and were approximately 30, 34, and 38 years of age in 1999. Of the respondents of the 1987 round, 47% were re-interviewed in 1999 ($N = 836$). In the 1995 wave, partners of the respondents were also interviewed. Because this study focuses on couples, the analysis is restricted to respondents whose partner was interviewed in 1995 and who still lived with the same partner in 1999 ($N = 392$).

### Dependent Variables

Both in 1995 and in 1999, respondents were asked how the following five household tasks were divided among partners: cooking, tidying up, doing the

**Table 1**
**Overview of Decision Rules and Hypotheses**

| Decision Heuristic | Mechanism | Hypothesis |
|---|---|---|
| Power rule | Access to social and economic resources determine influence | Attitudes of the husband are dominant with regard to all family life decisions |
| Golden mean rule | Partners have equal influence in negotiations | Attitudes of both partners are equally important with regard to all family life decisions |
| Sphere of interest rule | Traditional gender ideology determines influence | Attitudes of the husband are dominant with regard to decisions on labor market participation; attitudes of the wife are dominant with regard to decisions on household and caring tasks and childbirth |
| Social drift rule | Disagreement leads to continuation of the status quo | The stronger the divergence in attitudes between spouses, the more traditional the division of labor will be and the more childbirth will be postponed |

laundry, cleaning, and shopping. Respondents could choose among seven answering categories, varying from (1) *solely done by me* to (7) *solely done by partner*. For male respondents, the answering categories were reversed. Mokken scale analysis (Mokken, 1971) was used to construct a scale out of the five items. The analysis showed that the scale is reliable ($H = 0.36$, $p = .70$). The resulting scale runs from (0) *no contribution of the husband to household labor* to (10) *no contribution of the wife to household labor*.

With regard to the division of child care, respondents were asked in 1999, "Who performs daily care activities, like taking to bed, washing, and dressing the child?" Again, respondents could choose among seven answering categories varying from (1) *solely done by me* to (7) *solely done by partner*. For male respondents, the answering categories were reversed, so the resulting scale runs from (1) *solely done by the wife* to (7) *solely done by the husband*.

Both in 1995 and 1999, the wives were asked about their number of working hours per week of the current paid job. The maximum number of working hours could be 40 hours per week.

Finally, information on the full fertility history was used to ascertain whether a first child was born to the couple between 1995 and 1999, and if so, at what time.

## Attitudes

Gender role attitudes are measured with a scale based on four normative statements to which respondents had to respond in a self-administered questionnaire. The partner of the respondent responded to the same statements in a separate questionnaire. The statements are the following: (a) "it is normal for a girl to attend technical vocational school," (b) "it is unnatural for men to have a female supervisor at work," (c) "a woman is better suited for child rearing than a man," and (d) "it is most natural if the man is the breadwinner and the woman takes care of the home and the children." The answers vary from (1) *totally disagree* to (5) *totally agree*. After reversing the scores for items b through d, a scale was constructed out of these four items. Mokken analysis showed that the items formed an acceptable scale, with *H* coefficients of 0.38 ($p = .68$) for males and 0.37 ($p = .65$) for females. The scores on this scale could vary from (0) *gender specific attitudes* to (10) *egalitarian attitudes*. Table 2 shows that wives, on average, hold somewhat more egalitarian gender role attitudes than husbands. Still, in one out of every three couples, the husband holds more egalitarian gender attitudes than the wife (data not shown).

Attitudes toward parenthood are measured with five statements included in the self-administered questionnaire. These statements come from the *Values of Children Study* (Arnold et al., 1975). The statements are the following: (a) "I like to have children around me," (b) "I think that in a modern world, one can only feel comfortable and happy in one's own family with children," (c) "I think you can be completely satisfied with your life when you have been a good mother or father," (d) "I like to have children, because children really need you," and (e) "I think it is a civil duty to have children." The answers vary from (1) *totally disagree* to (5) *totally agree*. Again, a scale is constructed out of these items. Mokken scale analysis showed that the scale is acceptable, with *H* coefficients of 0.37 for both males and females ($p = .69$ for males and $p = .70$ for females). The scale scores could vary from (0) *not child oriented* to (10) *very child oriented*. Table 2 shows that on average, husbands and wives are equally child oriented. In one third of the couples, the husband is more child oriented than the wife, whereas the wife is more child oriented in another one third of the couples. In the remaining one third of the couples, the spouses are equally child oriented (data not shown).

**Table 2**
**Descriptive Information on Variables Used in the Analyses, for Couples Who Did and Couples Who Did Not Participate in 1999**

| | Range | Mean for Couples Who Participated in 1999 ($N = 392$) | Mean for Couples Who Did Not Participate in 1999 ($N = 163$) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Dependent variables | | | |
| Contribution husband to household tasks in 1999 | 0 to 10 | 2.93 | |
| Contribution husband to caring tasks in 1999 | 1 to 7 | 3.06 | |
| Hours paid labor wife in 1999 | 0 to 40 | 16.78 | |
| Childbirth between 1995 and 1999 | 0 to 1 | 0.52[a] | |
| Attitudes (independent variables) | | | |
| Egalitarian gender role attitude wife in 1995 | 0 to 10 | 8.40 | 8.40 |
| Egalitarian gender role attitude husband in 1995 | 0 to 10 | 7.81 | 7.76 |
| Child-oriented attitude wife in 1995 | 0 to 10 | 4.87 | 4.80 |
| Child-oriented attitude husband in 1995 | 0 to 10 | 4.84 | 4.53* |
| Control variables | | | |
| Contribution husband to household tasks in 1995 | 0 to 10 | 2.77 | 2.91 |
| Hours paid labor wife in 1995 | 0 to 40 | 20.54 | 21.40 |
| Hours paid labor husband in 1995 | 0 to 40 | 36.83 | 35.07 |
| Educational level wife in 1999 | 0 to 11 | 5.89 | |
| Educational level husband in 1999 | 0 to 11 | 5.91 | |
| Number of children in 1995 | 0 to 5 | 1.07 | 0.84* |
| Number of children in 1999 | 0 to 5 | 1.68 | |
| Cohort | 61 to 69 | 63.87 | 64.85* |
| Hours paid labor husband in 1999 | | | |
| Married in 1999 | 0 to 1 | 0.90 | |
| Union duration in 1999 (in years) | 3 to 20 | 11.72 | |
| Sex respondent (0 = Female, 1 = Male) | 0 to 1 | 0.48 | 0.48 |
| Percentage change in 1995 and 1999 | Increase | Decrease | |
| Contribution husband to household tasks | 46.9 | 39.8 | |
| Hours of paid labor by wife | 26.8 | 45.9 | |

a. This percentage is based on couples who were childless in 1995 only ($N = 154$).
*$p < .05$.

## Control Variables

Evidently, choices of couples are not only determined by their attitudes. Therefore, we control for other possible determinants of joint decisions in our models. Specifically, we control for the educational level of both partners, their working hours, the birth of any children, the number of children, marital status, union duration, and birth cohort. Educational level is measured by the number of years it takes to complete the highest level of education attained by the respondent. The number of working hours is based on reports of respondents on the number of hours they spent in paid labor. Childbirth is a dummy variable indicating whether a child was born between the two subsequent waves of the panel study. Depending on the specific analysis, the number of children measures the number of children living with the couple in either 1995 or 1999. Marital status is a dummy variable indicating whether the couple is married. Union duration measures the length of time a couple has been living together in years. Cohort is a variable taking the value 0 if respondents are born in 1961, 1 if respondents are born in 1965, and 2 if respondents are born in 1969. All joint decisions in 1999 are reported by one of the partners, the key respondent. Therefore, we included a variable indicating the gender of the key respondent in the analyses. By doing so, we control for possible differences in reporting for men and women.

To measure the causal effect of attitudes on behavior, the effect of attitudes measured in 1995 on behavior occurring between 1995 and 1999 was estimated, controlling for the initial behavior of a couple in 1995, namely, for the division of household tasks in 1995, the number of working hours of the wife in 1995, and the number of children in 1995. By controlling for the initial behavior, we make sure that effects of attitudes on behavior in 1999 are not spurious (because attitudes themselves may have been influenced by earlier behavior). As a result, we actually estimate the influence of attitudes on behavioral changes between 1995 and 1999 (Finkel, 1995). Unfortunately, in the analysis of the division of child-caring tasks, we cannot control for the division of child-caring tasks in 1995, as some couples were still childless in 1995. As a result, the effects of attitudes on the division on child-caring tasks remain susceptible to the spuriousness problem outlined above. In Table 2, we present the range and the mean of the dependent and independent variables.

## Panel Attrition

In a panel survey, selective attrition constitutes a serious problem (Menard, 1991). In this study, selective attrition may occur in two ways. First, the set of individual respondents interviewed in 1999 may differ from

the set of respondents interviewed at the start of the panel in 1987. Second, the set of couples of whom one of the partners was interviewed in 1999 may differ from the set of couples interviewed in 1995 (the year that serves as a baseline for our analyses). We pay attention to both types of attrition.

Selective individual attrition was assessed by drawing a comparison between characteristics of all individuals who participated in the first wave of the panel in 1987 and characteristics of individuals who still participated in 1999. Partner characteristics cannot be compared for these two groups, as most respondents were not yet living with a partner in 1987. Important for this study is that respondents who still participate in the panel in 1999 hold more egalitarian gender attitudes (7.6 vs. 7.1; $p < .01$) and hold less favorable parenthood attitudes (3.8 vs. 4.2; $p < .01$) than respondents who dropped out before 1999. However, in a multivariate analysis predicting dropout before 1999 that includes 28 predictors of dropout, these attitudes do not exert a statistically significant influence on dropout. The most important factors predicting dropout are not living with a partner in 1987, being highly educated, being nonreligious, having a negative feeling about the interview, and having a negative attitude toward nonmarital relationships. Together, these 28 predictors are not explaining attrition too well (Cox and Snell $R^2 = .07$), suggesting that individual attrition between 1987 and 1999 is not very selective.

Couple attrition results from the dropout of intact couples from the sample and from the dissolution of couples extant in 1995. Such attrition is likely to be selective, because couples who split have not been able to negotiate their disagreements successfully. The selectivity of the couple attrition between 1995 and 1999 was assessed by comparing the scores of participants and nonparticipants in 1999 (either resulting from dropout or from union dissolution) on the main dependent and independent variables of interest. The results of this analysis are presented in the two final columns of Table 2. Nonparticipating couples are somewhat younger and have fewer children than couples retained in the sample. In addition, the husbands in couples who participate in both waves are somewhat more child oriented than husbands in couples who do not participate in both waves. Thus, our sample seems to be slightly biased toward more traditionally oriented couples.

Finally, a somewhat different type of selectivity may influence the analysis of the impact of attitudes on first childbirth. This analysis is restricted to couples who did not have a child before 1995. Thirty-eight percent of all couples were childless in 1995. It was not a surprising finding that childless couples hold more egalitarian gender role attitudes and less favorable parenthood attitudes than couples who already had children in 1995. In addition, the wife in childless couples is employed for more hours

and the husband in childless couples contributes more to household tasks (data not shown). Thus, our analysis illuminates the impact of attitudes on late childbearing decisions rather than childbearing decisions in general.

## Method

To test all hypotheses except those derived from the social drift rule, we estimate the following regression model (see Kalmijn, 1994):

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_j X_j + \beta_m (A^w + A^h) + \beta_d \tfrac{1}{2} (A^w - A^h)$$

In this model, $\alpha$ is the intercept and $\beta_j$ is a vector with effects of the control variables. The test concentrates on the last part of model, in which $A^w$ represents the attitudes of the wife, $A^h$ represents the attitudes of the husband, $\beta_m$ is the mean effect of both attitudes, and $\beta_d$ represents the difference between both attitudes. In this model, the effect of the attitudes of the wife is equal to $\beta_m + \tfrac{1}{2}\beta_d$, and the effect of the attitudes of the husband is equal to $\beta_m - \tfrac{1}{2}\beta_d$.

If the golden mean hypothesis is correct, then $\beta_m \geq 0$ and $\beta_d = 0$. If $\beta_d \neq 0$, the attitudes of one of the partners are dominant. The direction of $\beta_m$ and $\beta_d$ determine jointly whether this is the wife or husband. If $\beta_m > 0$, then the power rule would imply that $\beta_d < 0$ for all $Y$ variables. The sphere of interest rule would imply that $\beta_d < 0$ for the labor force participation of females and $\beta_d > 0$ for the division of household labor and child care tasks and for the timing of childbirth. Finally, if $\beta_m = 0$ and $\beta_d = 0$, there is no effect of attitudes on behavior at all.

The social drift hypothesis cannot be tested with the model specified above. This hypothesis implies that there is no dominance of one of the partners but that the size of the difference between the attitudes of both partners is decisive. This hypothesis can be tested with the following model:

$$Y = \alpha + \beta_j X_j + \beta_m (A^w + A^h) + \beta_{ad} |(A^w - A^h)|$$

If $\beta_{ad} \neq 0$, the size of the absolute difference in attitudes determines the decision of the couple, and it is not important which partner has modern or traditional values.

The division of household labor and child care and the number of working hours of wives are analyzed by OLS regression analysis. The birth of a first child is analyzed by a Cox regression model, with the risk period starting at the moment of interview in 1995 and ending at the moment of childbirth

within the period 1995 to 1999. For couples who did not have children in this period, the risk period ends at the time of interview in 1999. Respondents who already had a first child before 1995 were left out of the analysis. In all models, we control for the earlier mentioned set of control variables.

# Results

## Similarity in Attitudes

Information on the level of attitude similarity between spouses is very limited. Therefore, before studying the impact of attitudes on behavior, we show some figures on attitude similarity between partners. In Table 3, the correlations between attitudes of husbands and wives are displayed. The correlation between husbands and wives for both parenthood attitudes and gender role attitudes is equally high, namely .34. Evidently, there is some attitude homogamy, but it is not strong. The correlation between parenthood attitudes and gender role attitudes for both husbands and wives is somewhat lower, namely –.29 for wives and –.25 for husbands.

## The Influence of Value Orientations on Joint Decisions

Next, we turn to the impact of spousal attitudes on joint decisions. Table 4 shows the results of the analyses of the influence of attitudes of partners on childbirth and the division of labor. In Model A, the average effect of attitudes of both partners is estimated. This model allows us to test whether the attitudes of couples have an impact on their couple-related behavior. In Model B, the difference in the effect of partners' attitudes is added to the model. This model allows us to test whether the golden mean rule, the power rule, or the sphere of interest rule applies. In the last model, Model C, the effect of the absolute difference between partners' attitudes is estimated. This model allows testing the social drift hypothesis. In our discussion of the results, we concentrate on the effects of attitudes on the joint decisions and do not pay attention to the effects of other variables.

The first panel of Table 4 shows the effects of partners' attitudes on the division of household tasks. In Model A, no statistically significant effects of either gender role attitudes or parenthood attitudes are observed, so no support for the golden mean hypothesis is found. Furthermore, in Model B, no effects of the difference in attitudes between husbands and wives can be observed either, implying that no support for the power rule or the sphere of interest rule is apparent, either. Finally, the social drift rule is tested in

**Table 3**
**Correlation Between Gender Role Attitudes and Parenthood Attitudes of Husbands and Wives**

| | Child-Oriented Attitude of the Wife | Child-Oriented Attitude of the Husband | Egalitarian Gender Role Attitude of the Wife |
|---|---|---|---|
| Child-oriented attitude of the husband | .34 | | |
| Egalitarian gender role attitude of the wife | –.29 | –.15 | |
| Egalitarian gender role attitude of the husband | –.14 | –.25 | .34 |

Model C. Here, a statistically significant effect of the absolute difference between husbands and wives in parenthood attitudes on the division of household tasks is observed. If husband and wife differ in their parenthood attitudes, the contribution of the husband to household chores is lower than if they do not differ in their attitudes. This result seems to support the social drift hypothesis.[1]

In the second panel of Table 4, the effects of partners' attitudes on the division of caring tasks are reported. In Model A, a clear effect of gender role attitudes of both partners is observed. As both partners hold more egalitarian gender role attitudes, husbands contribute more to caring tasks. In Model B, no significant effect of the difference between husbands and wives in attitudes is found. And finally, in Model C, the absolute difference in attitudes of a couple has no influence on the division of caring tasks, either. These results support the golden mean hypothesis: Attitudes of both partners play an equally important role in decisions on the division of caring tasks.

In the next panel of Table 4, the results of effects of partners' attitudes on the hours spent by the wife on paid labor are presented. Here, we see no significant effects of gender role attitudes of partners. However, we observe a significant effect of partners' parenthood attitudes. The number of hours that a wife spends on paid labor declines as the average attitude of both partners toward parenthood become more positive. These effects are net of the actual effect of having children on the labor force participation of wives. There is no significant difference in the effect of husbands or wives, as can be concluded from the statistically nonsignificant effect for the difference score in Model B. The absolute difference in attitudes between husbands and wives has no

*(text continues on p. 1506)*

**Table 4**
**Effects of Partners' Attitudes on Joint Decisions**

| | Model A | | | Model B | | | Model C | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ |
| *Division of household tasks* | | | .37 | | | .37 | | | .38 |
| Egalitarian gender role attitudes | | | | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | 0.01 | 0.03 | | 0.01 | 0.03 | | –0.01 | 0.03 | |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | | –0.05 | 0.04 | | | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | | | –0.09 | 0.06 | |
| Child-oriented parenthood attitudes | | | | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | 0.01 | 0.03 | | –0.01 | 0.03 | | 0.01 | 0.03 | |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | | –0.03 | 0.04 | | | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | | | –0.17** | 0.06 | |
| Control variables | | | | | | | | | |
| Cohort | –0.03 | 0.03 | | –0.02 | 0.03 | | –0.03 | 0.03 | |
| Education of wife | 0.05 | 0.03 | | 0.04 | 0.03 | | 0.04 | 0.03 | |
| Education of husband | –0.02 | 0.03 | | –0.02 | 0.03 | | –0.03 | 0.03 | |
| Number of children | 0.04 | 0.08 | | 0.05 | 0.08 | | 0.03 | 0.08 | |
| Childbirth | –0.13 | 0.16 | | –0.12 | 0.16 | | –0.10 | 0.16 | |
| Hours of wife's paid labor | 0.04** | 0.01 | | 0.04** | 0.01 | | 0.03** | 0.01 | |
| Hours of husband's paid labor | –0.02** | 0.01 | | –0.02** | 0.00 | | –0.02** | 0.01 | |
| Married (vs. unmarried) | –0.14 | 0.23 | | –0.16 | 0.23 | | –0.17 | 0.23 | |
| Union duration | 0.00 | 0.03 | | 0.00 | 0.02 | | 0.01 | 0.02 | |
| Male respondent (vs. female respondent) | 0.61** | 0.14 | | 0.61** | 0.14 | | 0.56** | 0.14 | |
| Husband's contribution to household tasks in 1995 | 0.34** | 0.04 | | 0.35** | 0.04 | | 0.35** | 0.04 | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Division of caring tasks* | | .16 | | .17 | | .17 |
| Egalitarian gender role attitudes | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | 0.09** | 0.02 | 0.09** | 0.02 | 0.10** | 0.02 |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | 0.02 | 0.03 | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | 0.05 | 0.05 |
| Child-oriented parenthood attitudes | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | –0.00 | 0.03 | –0.00 | 0.03 | –0.00 | 0.03 |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | –0.03 | 0.03 | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | 0.06 | 0.05 |
| Control variables | | | | | | |
| Cohort | –0.01 | 0.03 | –0.01 | 0.03 | –0.01 | 0.03 |
| Education of wife | –0.02 | 0.03 | –0.02 | 0.03 | –0.02 | 0.03 |
| Education of husband | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02 |
| Number of children | –0.03 | 0.08 | –0.03 | 0.08 | –0.02 | 0.08 |
| Childbirth | 0.13 | 0.14 | 0.12 | 0.14 | 0.13 | 0.14 |
| Hours of wife's paid labor | 0.01** | 0.01 | 0.01** | 0.01 | 0.02** | 0.01 |
| Hours of husband's paid labor | –0.00 | 0.01 | –0.00 | 0.01 | –0.00 | 0.01 |
| Married (vs. unmarried) | 0.14 | 0.28 | 0.15 | 0.28 | 0.17 | 0.28 |
| Union duration | –0.00 | 0.02 | –0.00 | 0.02 | –0.00 | 0.02 |
| Male respondent (vs. female respondent) | 0.55** | 0.12 | 0.56** | 0.13 | 0.57** | 0.13 |
| *Hours of paid labor by wife* | | .33 | | .33 | | .33 |
| Egalitarian gender role attitudes | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | 0.23 | 0.24 | 0.20 | 0.24 | 0.09 | 0.25 |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | –0.17 | 0.33 | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | –0.77 | 0.51 |
| Child-oriented parenthood attitudes | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | –0.72 | 0.27 | –0.75** | 0.27 | –0.69* | 0.27 |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | –0.25 | 0.34 | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | –0.45 | 0.53 |

*(continued)*

**Table 4 (continued)**

| | Model A | | | Model B | | | Model C | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ | *B* | *SE* | $R^2$ |
| Control variables | | | | | | | | | |
| Cohort | 0.16 | 0.28 | | 0.19 | 0.29 | | 0.17 | 0.28 | |
| Education of wife | 0.87** | 0.30 | | 0.84** | 0.30 | | 0.84** | 0.30 | |
| Education of husband | –0.22 | 0.25 | | –0.21 | 0.25 | | –0.25 | 0.25 | |
| Number of children | –1.95* | 0.79 | | –1.91* | 0.79 | | –1.98* | 0.78 | |
| Childbirth | –1.07 | 1.50 | | –1.06 | 1.50 | | –0.94 | 1.50 | |
| Hours of paid labor by husband | –0.10 | 0.06 | | –0.10 | 0.06 | | –0.10 | 0.06 | |
| Married (vs. unmarried) | –7.93** | 2.09 | | –7.98 | 2.10 | | –7.99** | 2.09 | |
| Union duration | 0.19 | 0.22 | | 0.20 | 0.23 | | 0.19 | 0.22 | |
| Male respondent (vs. female respondent) | –1.10 | 1.29 | | –1.05 | 1.30 | | –1.33 | 1.29 | |
| Hours of paid labor by wife in 1995 | 0.26** | 0.04 | | 0.26** | 0.04 | | 0.26 | 0.04 | |
| *Timing of first childbirth* | | | | | | | | | |
| Egalitarian gender role attitudes | | | | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | 0.00 | 0.05 | | 0.02 | 0.05 | | 0.01 | 0.05 | |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | | 0.04 | 0.06 | | | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | | | 0.05 | 0.10 | |
| Child-oriented parenthood attitudes | | | | | | | | | |
| Average score partners | .12* | .05 | | .13* | .05 | | .12* | .05 | |
| Difference score (wife – husband) | | | | .07 | .07 | | | | |
| Absolute difference score | | | | | | | .05 | .12 | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Control variables | | | | | | |
| Cohort | 0.07 | 0.05 | 0.06 | 0.05 | 0.07 | 0.05 |
| Education of wife | 0.08 | 0.06 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.08 | 0.06 |
| Education of husband | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.01 | 0.05 | 0.01 | 0.05 |
| Hours of paid labor by wife in 1995 | 0.02* | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02* | 0.01 |
| Hours of paid labor by husband in 1995 | 0.00 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.01 | 0.02* | 0.01 |
| Married (vs. unmarried) | 1.62** | 0.48 | 1.66** | 0.48 | 1.61** | 0.48 |
| Union duration | –0.00 | 0.04 | –0.00 | 0.04 | –0.01 | 0.04 |
| Male respondent (vs. female respondent) | 0.58 | 0.26 | 0.58* | 0.27 | 0.60* | 0.26 |

Note: The -2 log likelihood for the timing of first childbirth is the following: Model A = 707.15; Model B = 705.64; Model 706.55.
*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

effect on the hours of paid labor of wives, either. Therefore, the attitudes of both partners seem to matter in deciding the number of hours spent on paid labor by the wife, supporting the golden mean hypothesis.

The last panel of Table 4 shows the results for the effects on the timing of first childbirth. The results give no evidence for an effect of gender role attitudes of partners. However, there is an effect of partners' parenthood attitudes on childbirth; couples experience the birth of a first child earlier when they hold more positive attitudes toward children. In Model B, we see no significant difference in the effect for husbands and wives. There appears to be no dominance of the parenthood attitudes of one of the partners. Furthermore, there is no effect of the absolute difference in attitudes between husbands and wives on childbirth. This means that an increasing difference in attitudes between husbands and wives has no consequences for the timing of childbirth. From these models, we can conclude that for first childbirth, the parenthood attitudes of both partners matter and in the same degree. This result also lends support to the golden mean hypothesis.

## Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we examined the influence of attitudes of both partners on joint decisions of a couple. Two types of attitudes have been studied—namely, gender role attitudes and parenthood attitudes. First, we examined to what extent attitudes of partners show similarities. Next, we investigated the influence of both partners' attitudes on first childbirth, the division of household tasks, the division of caring tasks, and the division of paid labor. The central question was about which partner has the largest influence on joint decisions.

Four possible heuristics or decision rules are sketched for couples with dissimilar values to arrive at joint decisions. The first decision rule is based on the assumption that husbands have the strongest bargaining position, because of the fact that they have easier access to socioeconomic resources than wives do. Therefore, husbands hold more power within the relationship, and this leads to a dominance of husbands' attitudes (power rule). The second heuristic is based on the egalitarian assumption that attitudes of both partners are of equal importance for joint decisions. Following this reasoning, the behavioral outcome for couples with dissimilar attitudes will lie between the behavior of homogeneous traditional couples and homogeneous modern couples (golden mean rule). The third heuristic is derived from the New Home Economics Theory and suggests that each partner has his or her own life domain in which he or she has key responsibilities and decision authority

(sphere of interest rule). Finally, a fourth possibility is discussed—namely, that dissimilar values lead to avoiding decisions. The division of tasks will then stay traditional and childbirth will be postponed (social drift rule).

A first important result of our study is that attitude homogamy between partners is not complete. Both for gender role attitudes and for parenthood attitudes, we observe a positive but not very high correlation. Nevertheless, differences between attitudes of husband and wife are relatively modest. Within couples, the wife's gender role attitude is often a bit more egalitarian than that of her husband. For parenthood attitudes, we see that differences work both ways. The proportion of couples in which the wife holds a more favorable attitude toward parenthood is about equal to the proportion of couples in which the husband holds a more favorable attitude.

For most joint decisions (division of paid labor, division of caring tasks, and first childbirth), we found evidence that the golden mean decision rule is operative. Apparently, attitudes of both partners play an equally important role in decision making about these issues. These results correspond with the studies on the role of intentions and desires of both partners in childbirth decisions. Several studies show that the intentions of both partners play an equal role in the decision to have a child (Thomson, 1997; Thomson & Hoem, 1998; Thomson et al., 1990). Couples appear to strive toward consensus when they have dissimilar attitudes, and as a result, their behavior lies somewhere in the middle. Contemporary households have become bargaining households, in which partners have an equal influence on joint decisions. This result confirms results of studies on conflict and negotiation in households: Dealing with differences by bargaining and by reciprocity is an important decision-making strategy for spouses with different interests (Kluwer et al., 1997). Bargaining thus seems to belong to the very essence of modern conjugal relationships.

However, our study also hints at the fact that bargaining does not constitute the rule in all situations. In one of our four analyses, we found support for the so-called social drift heuristic. Husbands and wives who hold different parenthood attitudes seem to have difficulty in striking a balance as far as the division of household tasks is concerned. Couples with heterogamous attitudes stick to a more traditional division of the household tasks, irrespective of which partner is the more child-oriented one. This may result from the fact that many couples started from a fairly traditional division of labor. If the wife holds modern parenthood attitudes and the husband is more traditional, the latter may nevertheless simply refuse to take on a larger share of the household chores himself. If the wife holds more traditional parenthood attitudes, changing the division of household chores may even be more difficult,

as the wife has an incentive to stick to the traditional division of labor ("she wants to be a good housewife and mother"), whereas the husband has little incentive to change the division of household labor (i.e., it would result in an increasing workload and less appreciation by his wife). It might be that the golden mean heuristic does not work in a situation in which one of the partners experiences only a limited incentive to change the current situation, whereas the other partner has a strong incentive to retain the status quo. In such a situation, the social drift rule may apply.

Two types of attitudes have been examined in this study, namely, gender role attitudes and the parenthood attitudes. The results show clear differences in the importance of both types of attitudes for behavior. Parenthood attitudes play an important role in choices concerning childbirth, the division of household labor, and the number of hours that wives spend on paid labor. Gender role attitudes only influence the division of child-caring tasks. The fact that parenthood attitudes are more important than gender role attitudes is somewhat surprising. One reason for the fact that parenthood attitudes generally exert a stronger effect than gender role attitudes could be that the couples in this study have been together for a relatively long period of time (a mean union duration of nearly 12 years). It could be that gender role attitudes are particularly important in deciding on the initial division of labor within the couple. The more egalitarian the attitudes of both partners, the more equal the division of household and paid labor between them will be. Later on during the relationship, having and raising children may ask for adjustments in some aspects of the existing division of household and paid labor. Given that these adjustments result from the decision to have children, the decision about which of the partners will adjust his or her behavior most strongly to this new situation may depend on which partner is the most child-oriented one. At the same time, having children asks for negotiating one completely new aspect, namely, the division of child care tasks. Given that no previous arrangements for this type of labor exist, it could be that gender role attitudes, which provide a script for the way these tasks should be divided in general, are important in deciding on this particular aspect of the division of labor within couples.

We want to conclude with some methodological remarks. Our results are based on a panel survey. Some of the attrition in our panel is related to the attitudes of couples with regard to gender roles and parenthood. However, attrition seemed to work in opposite directions, depending on the type of decision studied. In general, our sample overrepresents rather traditional couples, because nontraditional couples were somewhat more likely to drop out from the panel. The opposite is true for the decision to have a first child. This subsample is somewhat biased toward nontraditional couples. The fact

that the golden mean rule turned out to be operative in the decision to have a first child and in most of the other decisions as well suggests that decision making might not be too different between relatively traditional and relatively nontraditional couples.

We would also like to stress that ours has been a conservative test of the decision rules. The small number of respondents in our study makes it hard to find statistically significant results. With a larger number of respondents, it could have been easier to trace possible patterns in dominance of one of the partners. In addition, we examine changes in behavior within a relative short period of time. This short time period may have made it hard to find statistically significant results. Nevertheless, the fact that we did find support for some of our hypotheses offers a clear indication for the existence of an influence of partners' attitudes on joint decisions. An important avenue for future research would be to address the question whether our results can be generalized. It would be interesting to examine the influence of partners' attitudes on other joint decisions. And it would also be very useful to examine the connection between partners' attitudes and their behavior within other cultures or countries to see whether the balance between partners is different in another (for instance, more traditional) context.

## Note

1. Partners often differ in their reports on the division of household and caring tasks (Kamo, 2000). It could be that the impact of attitudes differs, depending on who is reporting. Unfortunately, we have information from just one of the partners only and therefore cannot test for this possibility directly. However, an indirect way to test whether the gender of the reporting partner influences the estimated impact of attitudes on behavior is by including an interaction between gender of the respondent and attitudes in the model. We did so, but none of the estimated interaction effects were found to be statistically significant. Therefore, the effect of attitudes on behavior does not depend on the gender of the spouse reporting on that specific behavior.

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